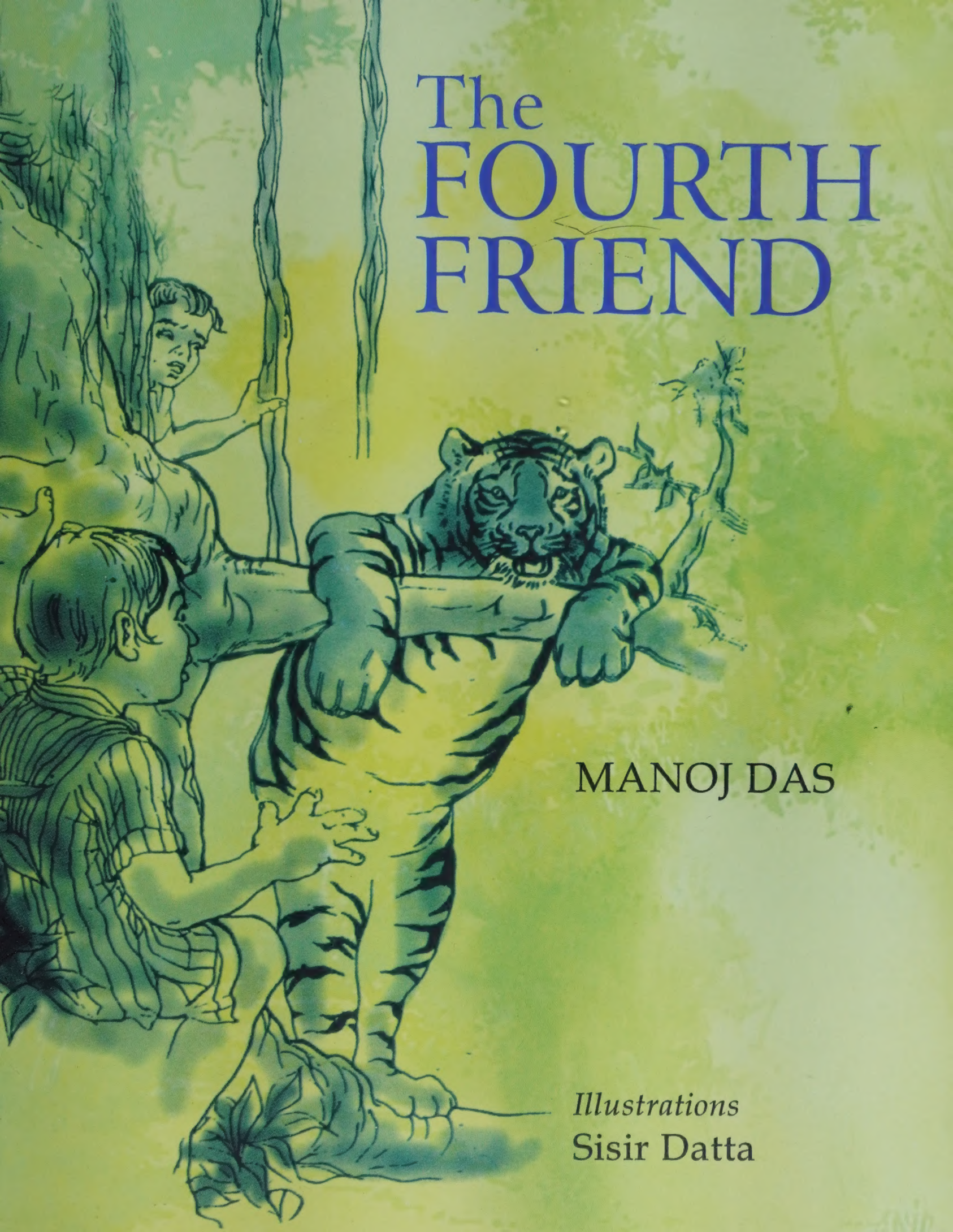

The FOURTH FRIEND

MANOJ DAS

Illustrations
Sisir Datta

Nehru Bal Pustakalaya

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1

Ramu, Jay and Shekhar were so deeply absorbed in their chat that they hardly knew when the wind had begun to grow cooler and the night darker. They had just seen the wonder that was the cinema for the first time. It was a touring troupe camping at Devla, the site of the biggest weekly market in the region.

It was the festive Dussehra season and Devla also hosted the Great Grand Circus. But one could not grab at both the opportunities. For reasons best known to them, their parents invariably thought that one such special treat in one vacation was enough for the boys. The circus had visited the place once earlier and Ramu and Shekhar had seen that phenomenon. Hence they had inspired little Jay to accompany them to the cinema.

The show had left Jay totally mystified. He had witnessed several opera shows performed on the frontyard of the village school. He had even had the chance to see a drama presented on a specially erected stage made up of all the cots available in the village and with a pair of mermaid-painted screens magically

parting and coming together at a whistle blown by some invisible master of the situation. But the cinema surpassed all the wonders he had known. How on earth could a plain white sheet change into a meadow or a mountain, a city or a bazaar, in the twinkling of an eye? How could a strong wind sway the trees and whisk away the *dupatta* of a singing damsel and surprise a handsome young man, almost gagging him with it a furlong away, while the audience sweated without a puff of breeze?

"But take it from me, Jay, there is neither any *mantra* nor any *fantra* in it!" Ramu's assertion carried authority. He was sure that what his teacher said, that Science could make the impossible possible, was true.

And his personal experience endorsed it!

That was a year ago. Two strangers from the town, one of them carrying a polished ebony box on his head, visited their village. They would open the box, fix a glistening dark disc on it and make a snake-like crooked stuff with a pin for its tongue to lick it—and lo and behold—the disc would keep circling like mad and the box would sing in a male or a female voice or in both at the same time.

"It is the miracle of the machine," the visitors from the town gravely informed the villagers. The head pundit of the primary school nodded in agreement. The audience probably believed it, but not Ramu's grandmother.

After playing the gramophone at several houses for a small fee for a couple of songs, the strangers came to spend the night at Ramu's. At midnight, after even the cat had fallen asleep and all was quiet but for the occasional snoring of the guests, Grandma shook Ramu awake. Like sneaky thieves they tiptoed to the weird box, Grandma carrying some delicacies in a plate.

"Now, now, my children, my son and my daughter, come out and eat. We promise, we'll tell none. Come out, little ones, enough of hiding.?

Grandma was sure that the box hid a couple of midgets. She patted the box and cajoled the petite singers to emerge, fully protected by her solemn assurance to keep their movement a

secret. But the strangers woke up and, realising the situation, swore in the names of several gods and goddesses familiar to Grandma that there was indeed no living creature of any size hidden in the box.

Grandma retreated in silence. It is not possible to say whether she changed her idea or not. Ramu, however, was known to his friends for his modernistic and rational outlook. He had seen at a city-returned relative's house a toy, modelled after a bob-haired English girl, dance when wound. If that was possible, why couldn't a wooden box sing when wound or, for that matter, some images of men and women sing and do sundry things when wound behind the screen?

"Who does not react to winding? Don't you leap and howl when the teacher winds your ears?" Shekhar observed.

But before Ramu had responded to this unwelcome reminder and analogy, a blood-curdling cry from the nearby village brought them to a halt. There were sounds of conch-shells generally made with the double purpose of sending appeals to heavens and to warn the people of a calamity, like a flood or an earthquake or a fire.

While the three friends tried to guess the cause of the warning, strange noises followed—cries of panic, thuds and splashes of heavy things collapsing on water and barking, bleating, bellows and moos.

"What's this?" Jay who had practically stopped talking since witnessing the talkie, asked in a faltering whisper. But Ramu and Shekhar appeared too stupefied to respond.

The very next moment they were lashed by a terrific wind, cold and sharp. Hardly had they come closer, holding on to one another with Jay in the middle, than they were engulfed by gushing water. Its level rose higher and higher, quite rapidly, as they plodded through it in the direction of their village, Vikrampur, as fast as they could.

Shekhar was the first to fall apart as a floating twisted branch snapped his hold on Jay. "Ramu, don't let Jay slip away. It is a flood, you know" was Shekhar's parting messsage.

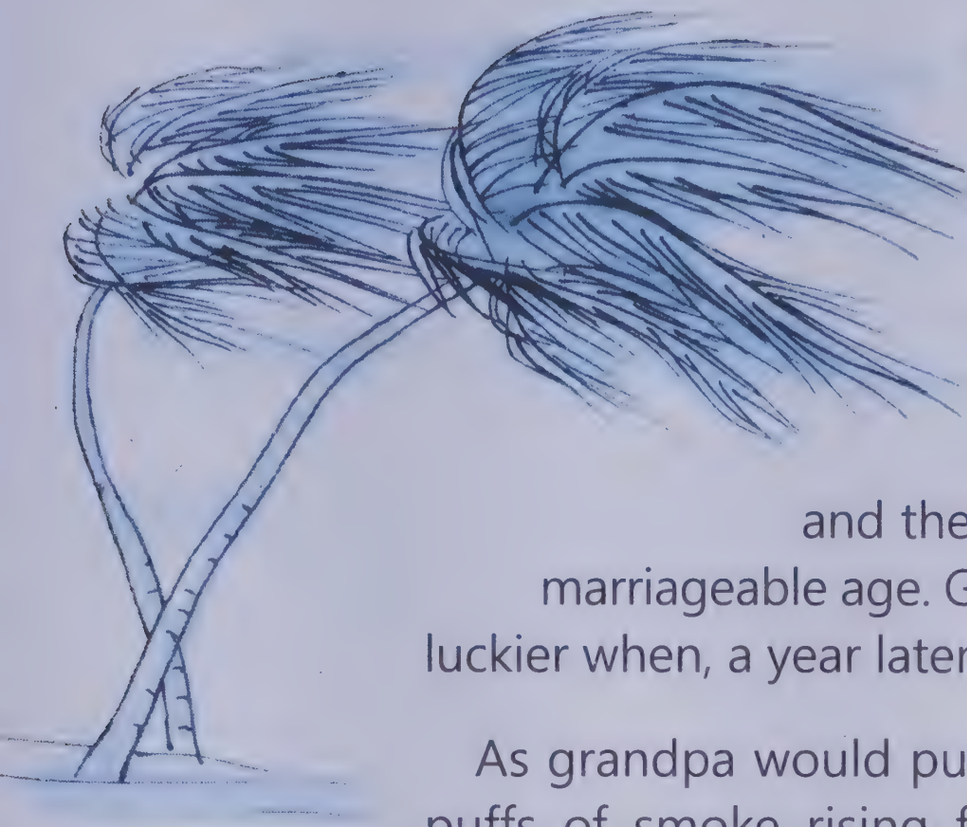
Ramu, of course, clung on to Jay as tightly as he could, but his limbs were getting numb.

"Where are you going, Shekhar?" asked Ramu, trying to locate him. But it was too dark for his eyes. Besides, a fine drizzle had just begun. The wind was alternately howling and hissing. Ramu could hear Shekhar's voice all right, but could not make out what his message was. He had realised that he should not expect any factual answer to his question, for Shekhar was being swept away by the current and was not moving by his own will.

There were flashes of lightning followed by cracks of thunder. In trying to clasp Ramu in a more dependable manner, Jay slackened his grip and slipped off instantly.

"Jay, Jay, where are you?"

But all Ramu could hear was a whimper. By then the water had reached his chest. He had a vague feeling that if the world had not already come to an end, everything in it was fast heading towards an end, passing by him. The floating lumps he saw were more than mere housetops or uprooted trees; they were also buffaloes, cows and who knows probably men and women too.



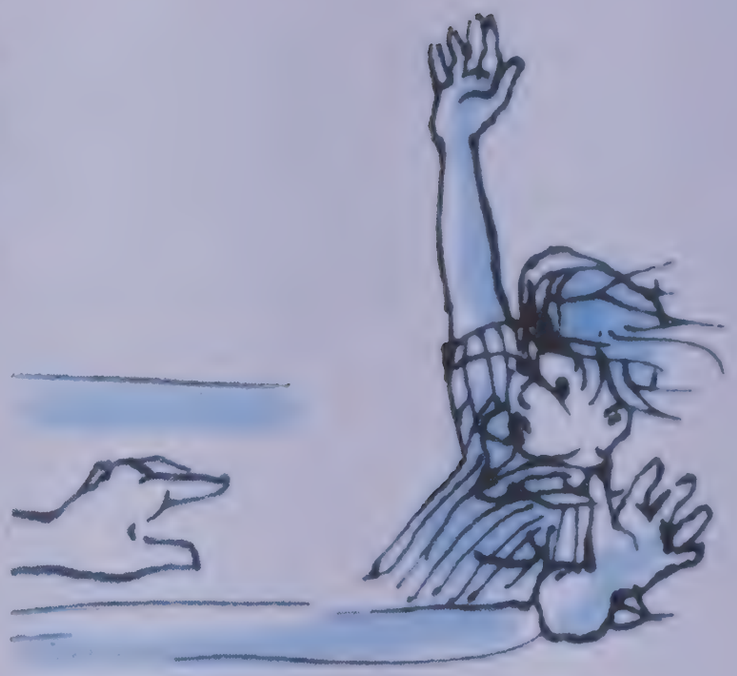
Once—that was some sixty years ago—a flood had carried away his grandfather, then a young man, and had dumped him atop a temple that luckily had a flat roof. He found himself amidst a couple and their daughter, a sweet girl of marriageable age. Grandpa considered himself luckier when, a year later, the girl became his bride.

As grandpa would punctuate his narration with puffs of smoke rising from his old *hukkah* that gurgled like a pampered cat, Ramu would wonder why such floods with such wonderful rewards in store should not occur when he was returning from the school or, better still, when he was proceeding to the school under duress.

Neck-deep in whirling water, Ramu did not find the flood that funny. He thanked heavens that he was not as scared as he thought he would be in a situation like this. How right Grandpa was when he said that at moments of crisis often a vault of courage concealed in a man's heart opened up.

Wading through the muddy water was proving more and more difficult for Ramu. Under his feet the earth seemed to be

continuously shifting. The current was pushing him westward. That was not bad, for that should lead him closer to his village, but to be forcibly carried by the flood was hardly any decent way to reach one's destination!



Ramu fought against the water and inched towards a leaning banyan tree.

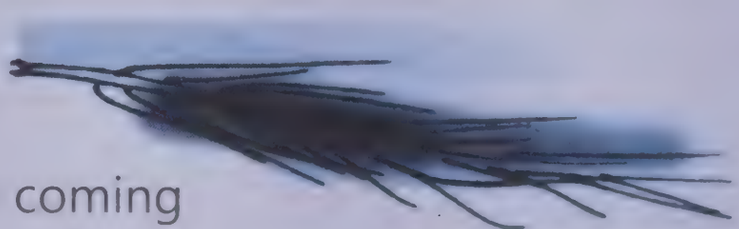
"Who is that? Ramu?"

Shekhar's voice had never sounded sweeter.

"Yes, yes!" responded Ramu, catching a hanging shoot of the banyan tree. "Is Jay with you?"he asked, beginning to climb the tree.

"How can he be with both? Was he not clinging to you? Well, if you have lost him, he is just lost!?

Oh no!" Ramu hopped on to a bigger branch and got pretty close to Shekhar.



"Jay" shouted Shekhar.

"Shekhar, I'm here!" Jay's voice, coming from a tree a few yards away, was feeble.

"Good that you are there. You are brave, aren't you?"

"Ramu, too, is here. He has just climbed the tree," said Jay with some relief.

"But, Jay, I'm here, not there. It's good someone else is there. Don't worry. We'll be together when things begin to be visible. Meanwhile, Jay, climb up to a higher branch; the water is still rising."

Ramu and Shekhar tried to out-shout the wind's whistling and other noises.

An hour passed, with the water level continuing to rise. But the atmosphere was growing quieter. Wails and shrieks from villages far and near and the sound of conch-shells had stopped. There was no barking of dogs, but from time to time some of them whined or moaned.

"Shekh-a-a-ar!" Ramu's voice suddenly cracked and made the distance between the two syllables prominent. He gave Shekhar a shake.

"Hss!" Shekhar pointed his finger at the mango tree, to be more precise, at the shape that hung onto its lower branch. "Do you suppose that is a man?" he asked in a whisper.

"May be a woman," Ramu observed thoughtfully. "Or...or... or..." His stammering started the very next moment.

"It's neither a man nor a woman, I bet."

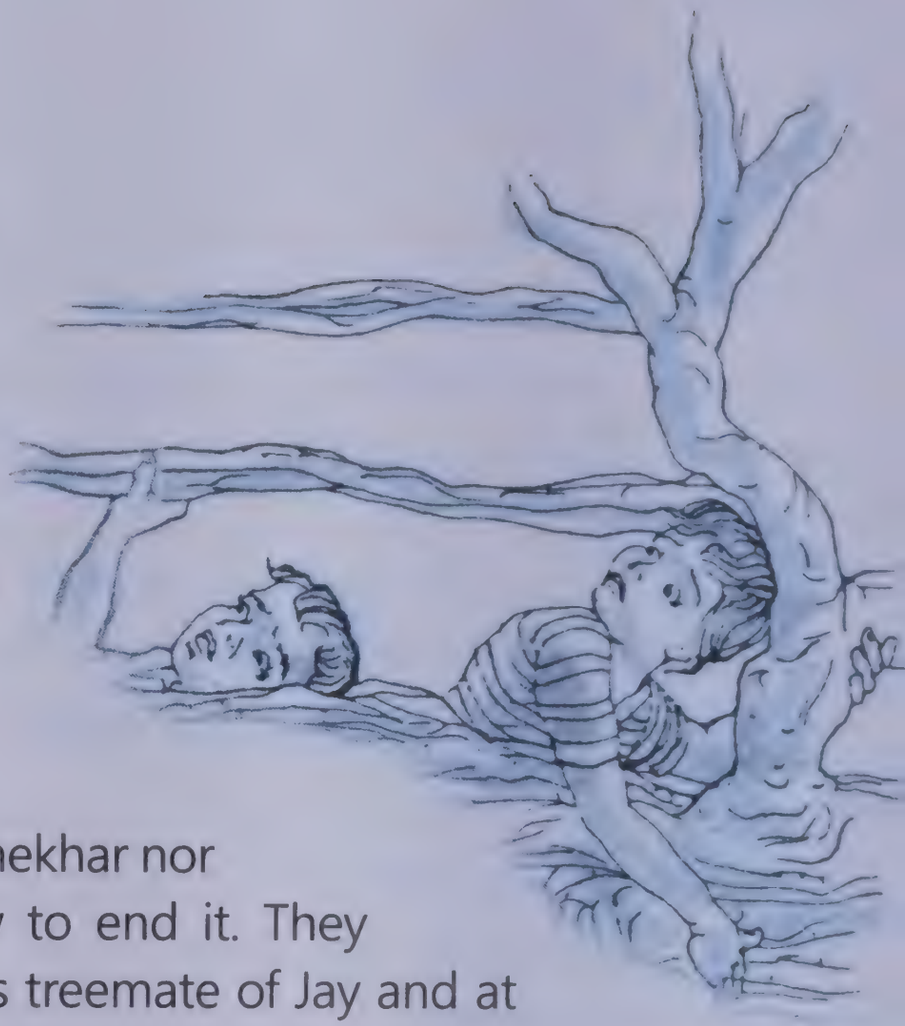
"Maybe a calf or a colt."

"Fool, do calves or colts climb trees?"

"Could it be a ghost?" Ramu sounded alarmed.

"Ghosts are not known to be affected by floods!"

"Then?"



There was silence. Neither Shekhar nor Ramu seemed to know how to end it. They kept gazing at the mysterious treemate of Jay and at each other, alternately.

"Shekhar!"

"Yes!"

"Isn't that a ti... ti... tig... tiger?"

"What is a ti...tiger doing there?"

"What are we doing here?"

"I mean, how can a tiger appear here? We didn't have any in our village or in the nearby villages!"

"It could have been driven by the flood from its home deep in the forest."

"Shekhar, do you think our Jay is still alive?"

"I believe he is and he will remain alive until it is time for the tiger's breakfast."

2

Shekhar had just finished delivering his very thoughtful observation when there was a sudden gust of wind followed by a fresh tide of flood. The banyan tree was caught up in a whirlpool. It spun like the village necromancer when possessed by spirits and was swept towards the mango tree. Ramu and Shekhar clasped its trunk with one hand each and clasped each other with the other.

Soon their tree was smoothly draped over the mango tree and stopped moving any farther. They were very close to Jay—and not far from the tiger which seemed to be observing the developments with great inquisitiveness. In the light of the dawn his eyes looked no brighter than the last two stars in the clouded eastern horizon.

Ramu and Shekhar had the simultaneous inspiration to jump into the water. But that was also the moment for them to realise how dearly they loved Jay. Could they escape, leaving Jay, who hardly knew how to swim, at the tiger's mercy?

"Jay, are you alive?" Shekhar asked in a subdued voice, in the manner

of eliciting a secret. A shivering Jay opened his eyes which he had kept totally shut from the moment he had known who his companion in the tree was. Now his cheeks swelled and his eyes bulged; he was ready to give out a howl.

Alas, poor Jay! A no less menace than the tiger was now staring him in the face. It was a cobra of impressive size swiftly climbing the tree. Its fearful hood was only a foot or so away from Jay's face.

Jay shut his eyes once again. But something unexpected happened. With one of his forelegs the tiger struck the serpent at lightning speed. The serpent flew into the water and disappeared in an eddy.

But Jay was in no mood to appreciate the tiger's gesture. He had fainted. While Ramu and Shekhar looked on helplessly, Jay's grip on the branch slackened. He was on the verge of tumbling down.

And, alas, he did tumble down!

Now it was for Ramu and Shekhar to shut their eyes. Not for more than a minute, though. When they mustered enough courage to look, they realised, to their horror, that the first part of their anticipation had already come true; the same to happen to the second part was obviously a matter of moments. Jay had fallen on the tiger, the tiger, however, was yet to clamp its teeth on him.

Jay lay sprawled, his head practically resting on the tiger's chest. Ramu and Shekhar were not absolutely sure, but it appeared as if

the tiger lent one of its forelegs to protect Jay from falling farther! What was more intriguing, the tiger, by his look at Ramu and Shekhar, seemed to suggest that they ought to take charge of their friend without any further delay.

Ramu and Shekhar exchanged meaningful glances. They did not dare open their mouths.

Shekhar was nearer to Jay. After a few silent gesticulations had gone in vain, Shekhar straightened his right arm and, uncertain of what would wake up Jay, planted a slap of moderate force on his right cheek.

That achieved the objective. Jay opened his eyes and blinked at them. He wore a bewildered look. They feared what would happen when he realised in whose embrace he lay.

And before long Jay woke up to the unusual warmth and softness of his haven and recollected the face that had thrown him into a swoon. He straightened his neck and saw that same face just above his own.

He howled and closed his eyes once again.

And once the silence had been broken, Ramu and Shekhar rediscovered their voices simultaneously.

"Jay!" they called out. Their hushed voices clearly disapproved of Jay's fear. They would not like that gentleman of a tiger to feel

offended in any way.

"Look here. Jay, he is good—very good —like any of us!" said Shekhar.

"True, and but for his courtesy, you would have been lost in the flood by this time or would have landed up in...?

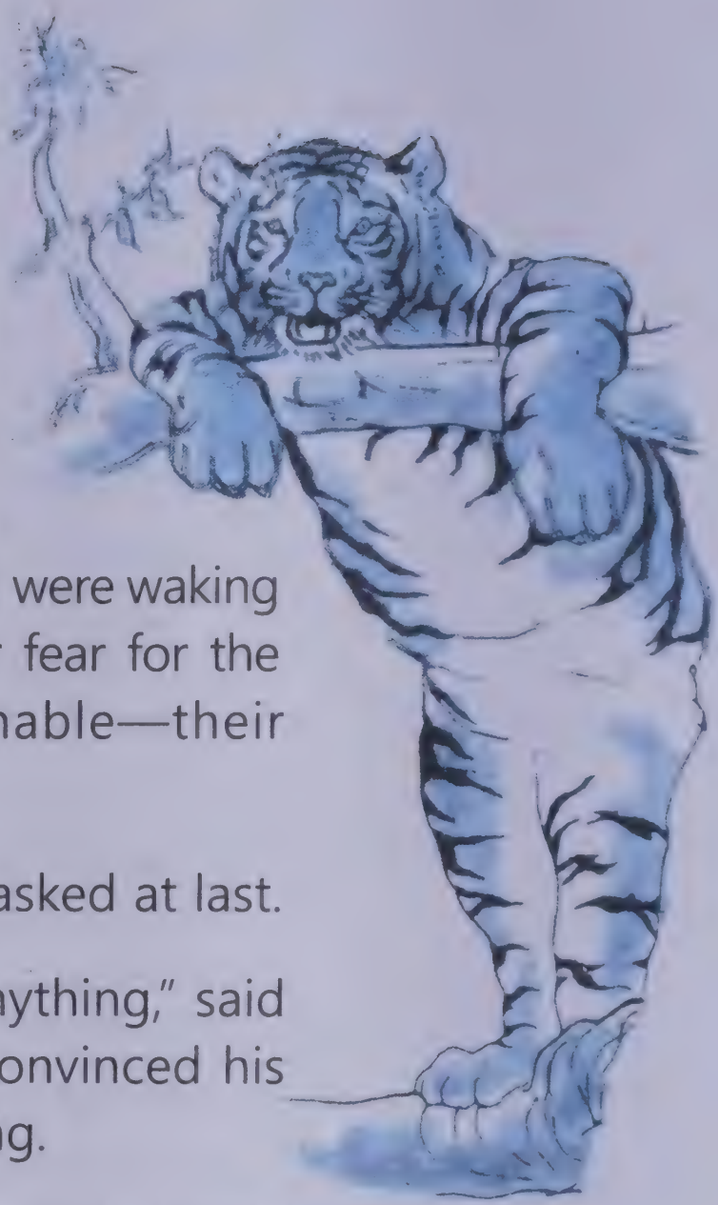
Ramu left his sentence incomplete. "...his tummy!" Shekhar boldly completed his statement.

The two friends looked at the tiger which, they expected, should be happy at their acknowledging his nobility. The tiger yawned.

Jay sat up and inched away from the tiger as cautiously as possible. Ramu and Shekhar helped him come over to their tree.

The two trees were in the process of getting more and more tightly interlocked, helped by the current and the wind. In the long silence that followed during which the tiger looked at them again

and again and they looked at the tiger, Ramu, Shekhar and Jay had begun to feel that they were no longer three friends but four.



The clouds looked fearful and the sun was struggling hard to shine through them. The familiar landscape had suddenly become alien. Amidst all this the three friends were waking up to the thrill of conquering their fear for the most dreadful situation imaginable—their proximity to the tiger.

"What should we do now?" Jay asked at last.

"I don't think it is time to do anything," said Ramu. Tiny creases on his brow convinced his friends that he was indeed thinking.

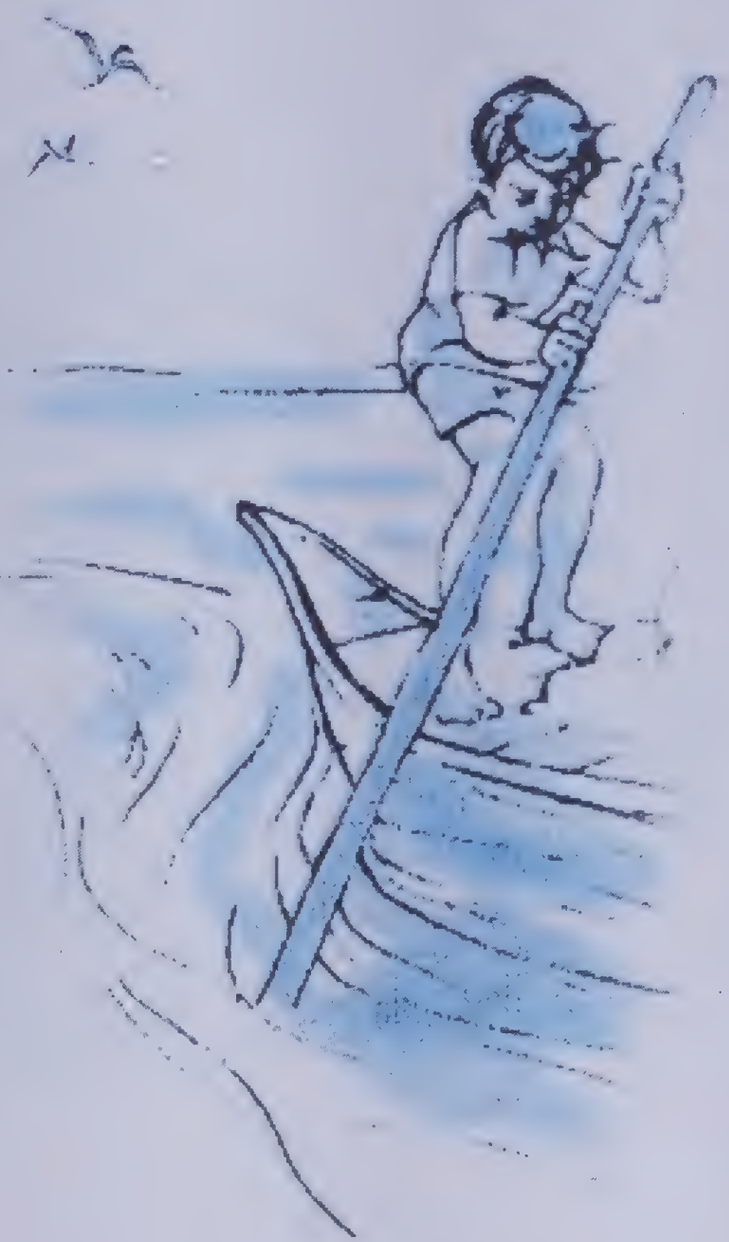
"Who says there is nothing to do? Look there!" Shekhar broke a dry twig and threw it with some force. The stick did not go far, but his friends could identify the object Shekhar had in mind. It was a small boat, empty, drifting towards them.

They smiled after many hours, but the smile did not last, for the boat took a sudden turn, avoiding them by half a furlong of muddy water.

"But we can't let it give us the slip" protested Ramu and, without waiting to consult his friends, jumped into the water and swam towards the boat.

His friends looked on with bated breath as Ramu grabbed the boat and jumped into it. Within minutes he brought it near the entwined trees, with the help of the bamboo pole he had found in the boat.

As Shekhar and Jay leaned forward and stretched one hand each and took hold of the boat, Ramu laid the pole down and picked up a fish. "There are two more, all almost dead. They must have jumped into the boat in panic."



"But I can't eat raw fish" declared Jay, on the verge of shedding tears. Ramu and Shekhar understood how hungry he was.

"You need not, Jay. It would not take us too long, to reach our village. And you know, floods never enter Vikrampur. No one

will mind if you decide to gorge upon all the food in the village! This is for the new friend of ours—yours in particular." Ramu held out the fish to the tiger who raised his right forepaw, obviously in appreciation of the offering. Ramu placed the fish near his mouth. The tiger clamped his paws immediately on it. A shiver ran through Jay's spine. A moment ago the tiger, had he so wished, could have done the same to him.

The other two fish were offered to the tiger by Shekhar and Jay, one after the other. The tiger cast a grateful glance at each of the three in recognition of their gesture.

"Should we leave now?" Ramu, still in the boat, asked.

Shekhar and Jay descended into the boot. The tiger was trying to stand up. He gave out a soft growl.

The three friends looked at one another. But it was Jay who spoke out what was in other's mind: "How can we leave him behind?"

Ramu and Shekhar nodded in appreciation of Jay's remark.

"Will you like to come with us?" Ramu put the question to the tiger, showing the boat. The tiger was as if waiting for this courtesy! He jumped into the boat instantly. The boat lurched, but Ramu steadied it by a masterly handling of the pole.

"But where do we go?" he asked.

"Home! Home!" Jay sounded quite impatient.

"Don't you understand what Ramu means?" Shekhar scolded mildly.

Jay understood. Alas, they could not just merrily walk into Vikrampur with a tiger for a buddy! The village had known floods and mild earthquakes, but tigers? Never!

"I've an idea. Can't our friend live in the Devi temple?" asked Jay.

"Why not!" Ramu responded thoughtfully. "A wonderful ideal" exclaimed Shekhar.

The Devi temple lay deserted ever since the idol had been stolen a year ago. Nobody cared to enter it. Besides, the temple was situated outside the locality, at a lonely edge of the village. It should prove an idea camp for their very special guest.

"One thing we must guard against is people seeing our friend. They might kill him," said Shekhar.

"But isn't killing tigers forbidden nowadays? Didn't the headmaster tell us about it while explaining the story of three wizard friends who revived a tiger?" asked Ramu.

The memory of the story of course dampened their excitement for a moment. One of the three wizards had assembled the scattered bones of a tiger lying for ages; the other friend had restored the beast to its flesh and blood; but no sooner had the third wizard breathed life into it than the tiger pounced upon them all and finished them off.

But this tiger was surely different.

"I know that the Collector is camping at Devla. As soon as the water recedes, we must proceed there and inform him about our friend," said Ramu.

Shekhar and Ramu readily agreed with him. Shekhar made a second pole out of a shoot of the banyan tree. It would now be easy to ply the boat, pushing it with two poles.

The tiger and Jay stood in the middle of the boat. Luckily the atmosphere was foggy and they took care to avoid going closer to a couple of other boats plying at some distance or floating thatches or trees with people on them. The boys continued their voyage through submerged paddy fields.

With the help of a stick Jay picked a cotton shawl that was drifting away from a sinking thatch. He squeezed the water out of it to the last drop and draped the tiger with it, save its head and tail.

Indeed, the tiger now looked more gentlemanly than all the gentlemen they had known.

"If only we could hide these two things of our friend from the onlookers, then all should go well," said Jay, pointing at both the impressive ends of the tiger, the slightly swinging tail in particular.

3

Luck was in their favour for, when they touched the village on the temple side, there was not a soul around to take note of them. The tiger, quite conscious of the elevation wrought in its status by the shawl, displayed a dignified gait.

The temple door had remained unlocked since the idol's disappearance. The sanctum sanctorum and the outer hall where the devotees used to gather were two sections of a single structure. The outer chamber had a couple of small windows, though the sanctum sanctorum had none.

"Let our friend rest for a while. We must hurry home. They must be quite anxious on our account—I mean the kind of mothers we have!" said Ramu in a tone of indulgence. Jay and Shekhar nodded.

They realised how right Ramu had been as soon as they approached their houses. Their mothers rushed out with open arms; their fathers smiled and heaved sighs of relief and discussed among themselves how to call back those kinsmen who had fanned out in search of the boys.

The flash flood and the fear of a fresh downpour kept all the elders preoccupied. The boys were left with all the privacy they needed to talk about their great charge when they assembled after their meals.

"What about our friend's lunch?" they now asked one another and each produced an item from his pocket. Ramu had secured a banana, Shekhar a cucumber, and Jay a pouchful of puffed rice.

"About our friend—not a word to anybody!" Ramu warned Jay. Shekhar had already done so. Jay had to suffer their counselling on account of their seniority.

They shut the door tight after entering the temple. The tiger, no doubt, was expecting them, for it walked towards them briskly. They laid out their gifts before him, Jay spreading down the puffed rice on the floor.

The tiger sniffed at the banana and the cucumber in a rather detached way, but ate the puffed rice. However, he played with the fruits for a while, shuttling them between his two forepaws,

"I understand, our friend does not relish vegetables. Well, securing food for him is going to be tough," observed Shekhar,

"Yes. But we must face the problem bravely," said Jay. He sounded much braver than his age, his size, and his past record would justify, but surely he had added considerably to his stature during the few hours past! Ramu and Shekhar could not but appreciate the fact

that very few heroes on earth could drop themselves right into a tiger's embrace and emerge unscathed, and fewer still could have the courage to pack a tiger in a shawl.

"He has to be supplied with the right kind of food—the meat of a lamb or a goat or a fowl," said Ramu solemnly. He knew that he was being a visionary. They had never seen a lamb save its picture in a book. Vaishnavites as they were, most of the folks considered even a mention of chicken an act verging on sin and that of egg, sin proper.

But Pitubai, the old widow living in a lonely hut, owned a pair of goats and a kid-goat too.

"But we have to be firm and sacrifice one of the goats of Pitubai to our friend," said Ramu with a certain authority, suggesting that there were moments when you could not but commit a minor crime for the sake of a lofty cause.

"Preferably the kid-goat. She would most probably blame the jackals for its disappearance," he added.

The exciting idea was supported by sound common-sense; even then Shekhar and Jay kept silent for a moment and then Jay asked, "But how do we go about it?"

"How, you ask? Why, are we not men? What can we achieve in life if we cannot bag a mere kid-goat?"

Ramu's forceful question informed his friends that the time for

hesitation was past; they were the tiger's friends; to a certain extent they, too, ought to act like tigers!

As they came out into the open and locked the temple door behind them, they saw Ghanu, notorious as Ghanu Goonda or Ghanu the Ruffian as he was referred to behind his back, keenly observing them from the other side of a bush. They did not like that, for they did not like Ghanu Goonda. He used to be a mere watchman at the zamindar's villa before the abolition of the feudal system. Somehow he exercised greater powers than the Naib, the

zamindar's representative for the area. Ghanu still had some clout with the zamindar's family, he visited them from time to time at the town where they had settled down.

However, Ghanu seemed more anxious to hide himself from their gaze!

It was a clouded sunset when they spotted the nanny-goat suckling its kid not far from the temple. They exchanged meaningful glances among themselves. There was no time to lose.

"But how do we go about it?" Jay repeated his rather unwelcome question.

A grim resolution to face the challenge was fast forming on Ramu's face.

"It's easy," he answered like a past master in the business. "We've to grab it and then gag it and carry it into the temple. That's all. The tiger will do the rest."

"With what do we gag it?" asked Jay

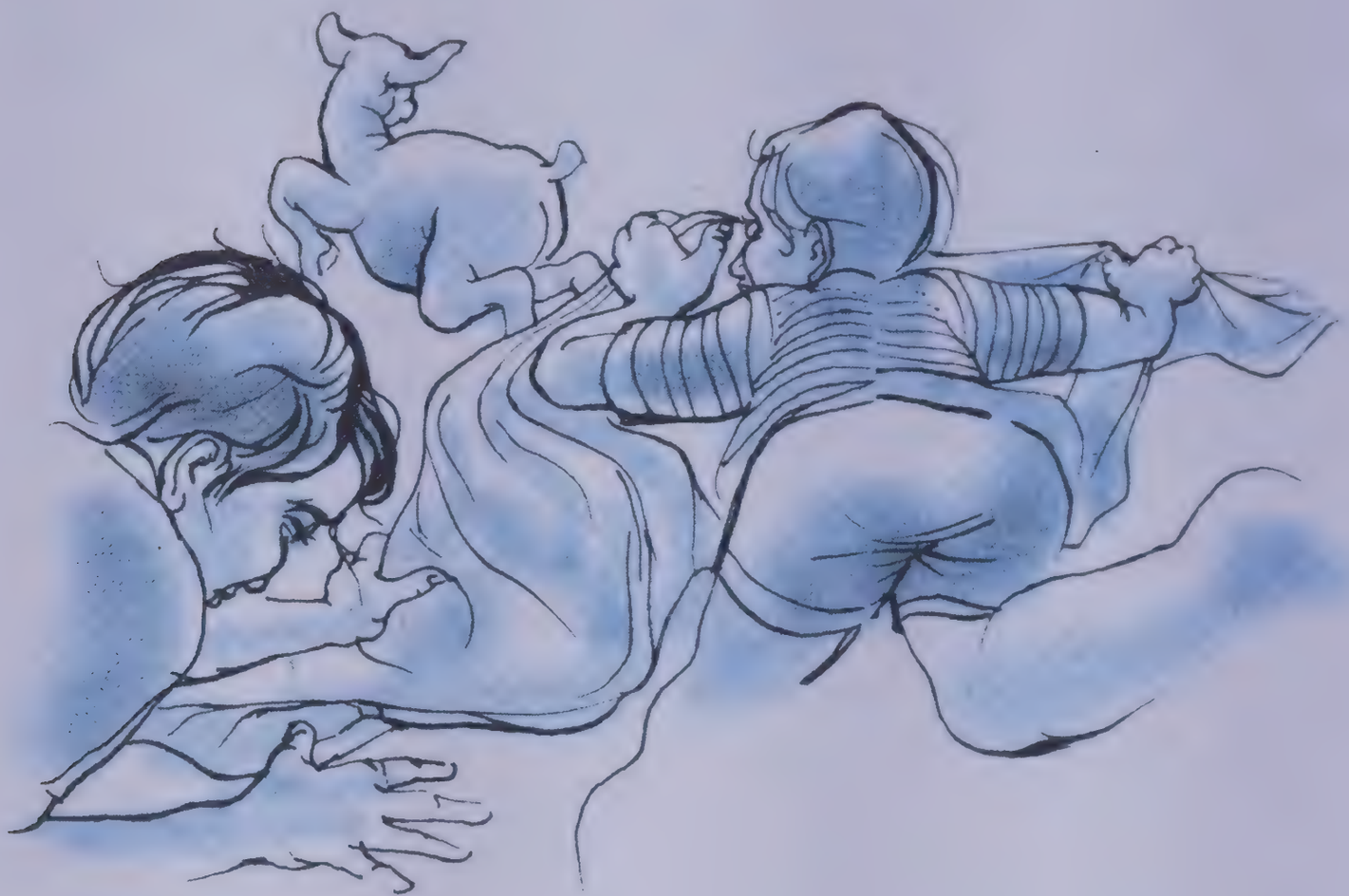
"With your shorts, of course" answered Ramu. "It is common sense!"

"Why with my shorts?" Jay was on the verge of tears.

"With whose then? You don't expect us elders to undress before you!" Ramu sounded as serious as he could.

Jay suddenly began to run. His friends did not try to stop him. They seemed to relish the respite from the gruesome task ahead.

But Jay was back in a few minutes. He had fetched the tiger's shawl. Now there was no more argument for delay.



"All you've to do is, trap the kid-goat at once without giving it a chance to run away. Now, go along. I must keep watch on the surroundings and warn you in case anybody comes this way," said Ramu.

"Ramu, it's better you and Jay do it. I'll keep the indispensable watch," said Shekhar.

"Come on, let's all do it together and finish with it."

Jay's proposal sounded quite sensible. Now they were all set for action. Holding the shawl like a shield before them, the hunters took careful steps and then pounced on the kid-goat. But the kid-goat moved away just in time. As a result, the hunters fell flat on their chests on the damp ground. The nanny-goat and the kid-goat sprinted away at record speed.

It was Jay who laughed first. "I've a question," he said. "Even if we feed our friend with the kid-goat today, what about tomorrow? Well, I've another idea."

"What is it?"

"We spare the kid, but steal its mother's milk"

"A really wonderful idea!" exclaimed

Shekhar and Ramu, patting Jay on the back.

"If it is milk, I can always bring some from home," said Shekhar. The proposition sounded like sweet music when compared with the task of milking the goat.

By evening Shekhar had managed to bring some milk and Ramu some puffed rice. They mixed the two items in an earthen pot and offered the dish to the tiger. The tiger finished it, albeit reluctantly.

Next day they succeeded in catching a shoal of fish by placing a basket-net at one of the outlets for the receding flood water. But the tiger ate only a few of them. He was beginning to look weak and pensive.

The flood was subsiding very fast. The three friends decided that it would be wise for Jay to proceed to his maternal uncle's village, Sumanpur, and have consultation with Bipin. Though lately active as a marriage-broker, Bipin was the only man in the region who had some authentic knowledge of tigers, for he had once worked in a zoo. Jay's maternal grandmother, who had been detained at Vikrampur because of the flood, was anxious to get back home. Nobody could object to Jay accompanying her as one of her escorts.

Sumanpur was not more than five miles away and they set out early in the morning. Even then, it was past mid-day when they reached their destination. They had to cover a mile by a dinghy and for the rest, had either to plod through the mud or take detours.

Jay located Bipin at once. It was not difficult to engage him in conversation. But it proved well nigh impossible to elicit any useful information from him. The word tiger would immediately inspire him to begin narrating one of his several fabulous encounters with those dangerous inmates of the zoo.

"One evening a tiger—a Royal Bengal one at that—jumped the zoo and entered the Lat Sahib's compound. The durwan fainted at his sight; the servants of the household followed suit and in a minute, the tiger was seen right inside the Lat Sahib's bedroom."

Bipin paused to see the effect of the suspense on Jay.

"I was, of course, running after the beast. Before he could pounce upon the lolling Memsahib, I jumped onto his back and twisted both his ears as well as his tail and made him run back to the streets. Traffic came to a halt. Spellbound passers-by watched me and my grand but docile beast—and not a few fainted—all the way to the zoo," Bipin reminisced, chewing a fragrant pan.

"What food did you offer him after reaching the zoo?" Jay had to exercise great patience, but he brought up the question of the tiger's diet at every opportunity.

"Food you are curious about? Well, the Lat Sahib threw a banquet in my honour. But I could hardly finish half of the dishes; there were so many. They had resolved to award me a gold medal the size of the full moon. The Lat Sahib had already placed order with a London goldsmith. But, you know, the Sahibs had to suddenly leave India!" Bipin sighed.

Jay felt like weeping. Must he return to his village only to report to his friends that his mission to find out a tiger's menu had been a fiasco?

But there was a silver lining in the cloud. Bipin himself was paying a visit to Vikrampur. Maybe, Shekhar and Ramu would agree to take him into confidence and place their problem before him. Maybe, with his help and recommendation they could book a permanent place for their friend in the zoo. They wouldn't mind Bipin riding the tiger all the way to the town, if the tiger did not mind it.

Jay persuaded his grandmother, his uncles and aunts to allow him to return home the very next day in Bipin's company, as their other companion, the Chowkidar of Vikrampur, had already left.

On the way Bipin told Jay all about his own mission at Vikrampur.

The good old Naib's home was engulfed in a crisis. The Naib's grand-daughter, Shakuntala, had been married when seven. Now that she was a young lady, she ought to go over to her husband's home. The husband, too, had arrived to take her away, but he refused to enter the house unless he was given a new bicycle. He camped on the Naib's verandah which, of course, was quite spacious and his in-laws had hung a tarpaulin to protect him from wind and rain. He had consistently refused to look at Shakuntala, even though she brought him his breakfast, lunch and dinner regularly.

"The chap had been given everything that should be given to a young man pursuing the noble vocation of a teacher in a primary school. The Naib does not like his demanding a thing in this manner. As you know, the Naib is a good and kind man. In fact, he was ready to give him a milch cow. But the young man has spoilt his mood. As the gentleman who had brought about the marriage, I have a crucial role to play at this juncture and luckily the son-in-law is detained on account of the flood," said Bipin.

"What do you propose to do, Uncle? And, by the way, how do you feed a tiger when he refuses to enter his father-in-law's house?"

"What do I propose to do, eh? Heh, heh, whatever I may do, Jay, such a situation will never arise when I fix up a bride for you. But, Jay, you ought to grow up faster!"

Jay sighed in frustration.

4

They reached Vikrampur a little before noon, for they had walked very fast. Jay broke away from Bipin and ran towards the temple. Its door was wide open. He was sure that Ramu and Shekhar were inside. He bolted in, but did not find anybody in the hall. He peeped into the sanctum sanctorum. He waited for his eyes to grow accustomed to the darkness.

But where was the tiger? And who was that creature sprawling in a corner. An ominous question was surging up in his mind. Had the tiger, in a sudden spurt of hunger, eaten up one of his friends and flattened the other and run away?

Jay tiptoed towards the fellow lying motionless. He recognised him. To his utter surprise—he was Ghanu Goonda. And what was it that he held in his arms? Good God! Was it not the idol of the temple supposed to have been stolen a year ago?

But where were his friends? Jay rushed out, went round the temple and shouted for them. He then came back into the temple and called, "Ghanu Uncle!" There was no response. It now occurred

to him that he should inform the Naib, the village chief, about Ghanu's condition and the surprising phenomenon of the idol's reappearance.

He ran towards the Naib's house. But midway he was stopped by Bhola, the grocer's son, who stood among a group of women and children. Only then did Jay take note of the commotion in the village.

"Don't go in that direction, you fool!" Bhola warned him.

"Why? Will you tell me what happened? I was away at Sumanpur."

"What happened? You better ask what is still left to happen," demanded Bhola. But then the opportunity to narrate the momentous event to someone totally ignorant of it excited Bhola so much that he could hardly say a single thing coherently. All Jay understood was, a huge man-eater was out on a murderous spree and that youngsters had been forbidden to go beyond that limit!

"Where are Ramu and Shekhar?"

Bhola was not sure, but he said thoughtfully, "Maybe already eaten up by the tiger."

Jay swept Bhola aside and ran forward. He saw Bipin retreating from the direction of the Naib's house, panting and sweating.

"Bipin Uncle! You're the only man in our land, maybe in the world, to have had a ride on a tiger. Come, let us take charge of the tiger.

They may not allow me to go near our friend unless accompanied by you!" Jay cried out pleadingly,

But Bipin was retreating in great haste. He was soon lost amidst the throng of women and children.

Jay resumed running forward.

"You boy! Are you crazy?" A number of elderly people who had gathered in front of the primary school shouted at Jay. Finally, it was the headmaster who stepped forward and stopped Jay,

"Sir, where's the tiger?" Jay asked impatiently, "Please tell me, Sir, for I was away."

"Have patience, Jay! Patience is a great virtue. The tiger has entered the Naib's house. He drove the Naib's grandson-in-law in. We don't know what the beast has done to him. He was a brave and budding teacher, mind you."

"O God!" Jay was beginning to cry,

"Don't panic, Sonny, didn't I tell you that courage is a great virtue? I'm here to protect you. Besides, Virdas the gunman, popularly known as Virdas the jackal-killer, has just arrived. He should be able to put an end to the terror before long."

"The gunman? Do you mean to say they are going to kill the friend?"

"The friend? Who? Whose?"

But Jay was not there to satisfy the perplexed headmaster's query. He made a dash towards the Naib's verandah.

"You boy!"

"Jay! Are you possessed?"

"You mad-cap!"

A dozen voices, some subdued, some loud, but all of them marked by anxiety and despair, tried to stop him. A glimpse of the house-top revealed to him Virdas kneeling on the roof and thrusting the barrel of his gun through a hole made in the thatch. He was flanked by the two sons of the old Naib.

"Please don't shoot!" shouted Jay at the

top of his voice. He was already on the Naib's verandah. Nobody was there to stop him. The doors lay open. He stepped in. There sat the tiger, its back towards the entrance. He stood up hearing Jay's voice. Close to the opposite wall, facing the tiger, on a large wooden chest sat the grandson-in-law. His wife stood in front of him, her arms thrown wide, obviously to protect her husband's invaluable life from the tiger, or at least to sacrifice her own life first.

"No, no, believe me, sister Shakuntala, my friend will do no harm to your husband even if he demanded a bicycle!"

Jay knelt down and put his arms around the tiger's neck and looked up. Through a round hole he saw the mouth of the unsteady barrel and the eyes of the gunman.

"Gunman, Sir, please save your bullet. And, you uncles on the roof, will you please ask Ramu and Shekhar to join me here? Please! I assure you, this tiger is our friend!" Jay could not check his tears any longer.

"He is hungry, sister Shakuntala. Can you fetch some milk?" he said between sobs.

Shakuntala withdrew her extended arms and looked over her shoulder at her husband. As she began to move towards the door opening into the kitchen, the husband promptly descended from the wooden chest and followed her in unseemly haste.

There were murmurs on the verandah. There were noises of awe

and disbelief. Somebody was whimpering.

"Who's crying? Has the tiger really harmed anybody?" Jay asked. He betrayed more confidence that the tiger could not have done any such thing, than anxiety.

The crying stopped and the crier peeped through the door.

She was Jay's mother, upset and puzzled over her son's weird conduct.

"Mother, don't you see I'm hale and hearty? But, please tell me first, has the tiger harmed anybody?"

His mother shook her head to indicate that the tiger indeed had not done any such thing.

Suddenly many voices were heard; among them were distinctly alien accents. And they were followed by the most welcome voices of Shekhar and Ramu.

Jay sprang up. The tiger followed suit. At the door appeared a surprised but smiling young man, well-dressed though carrying patches of mud all over his person. The tiger rushed out, in the process reducing the smart young man's smile to a scared grin—to meet the person behind him.

"O my Timpu! How much worry you caused us!" The stranger, who sported an impressive moustache curled upwards, said to the

tiger exactly in the manner the mothers of Jay, Ramu and Shekhar had expressed their anguish to the boys when they had been found. Some villagers who had seen the circus recognized the stranger.

Soon the old Naib came forward and warmly received the smart young man. Shekhar and Ramu, still panting, hugged Jay. From them Jay understood that the young man was none other than the Collector who was camping at Devla bazaar.

The Collector lifted Jay by way of congratulating him for his bravery and for saving the tiger from a painful death. Two sepoys pulled in a cage to the spot. At a hint from the stranger with the curled moustache, the tiger quietly entered the cage.

The Collector was offered the solitary chair in the Naib's household. The stranger, who was the tiger-tamer of the Great Grand Circus, knelt down near the cage, feeding the tiger with some cake-like food he had brought. The sepoys and the two other members of the party sat down on the floor. All were treated to tender coconut water.

Shekhar and Ramu hurriedly narrated to Jay all that had happened. Suddenly out of the temple the tiger rushed towards the Naib's house, driving the sulking grandson-in-law in and followed him in. On their way to the temple Ramu and Shekhar observed the great panic. Women had begun wailing.

All were sure that the tiger had made short work of the grandson-in-law. Soon, of course, careful surveys from safe distances showed that the tiger had done nothing but sit and look at the trembling young man protected by his wife. However, when Ramu and Shekhar heard hurried discussions on summoning Virdas, the jackal-killer, and on other possible ways of killing the tiger, they concluded that the only way they could save their friend was to seek the camping Collector's intervention.

And they made a beeline for Devla, running through knee-deep water most of the way,

covering an hour's distance in half an hour. Not only the Collector, but also the Manager and the tiger-tamer of the circus were there, discussing the mystery of the missing tiger. The flash flood had come just when the tiger was performing in the arena.

The party started for Vikrampur by jeep, Ramu and Shekhar experiencing their maiden ride in an automobile.

"But why did our friend leave the temple and why is Ghanu Goonda lying inside, clutching the missing idol?" asked Jay.

"Missing idol? Ghanu Goonda?"

By then crowds had surrounded the caged tiger and the trio. Jay's question intrigued them. At the Naib's instruction some of them dashed out to the temple. Ghanu Goonda was still lying unconscious. He was brought to the Naib's verandah where he regained consciousness after a mugful of water was sprinkled on his face. He confessed to his crime before the Collector. It was he who had dislodged the idol from Her

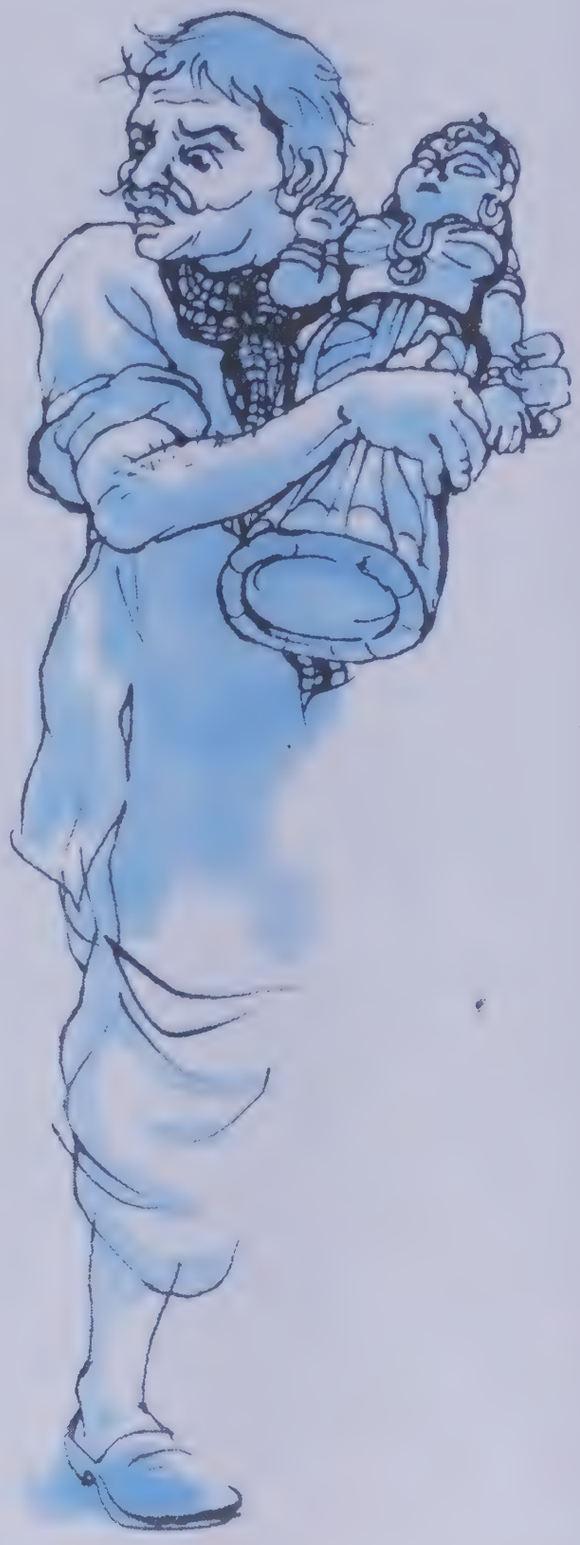
seat. But suspecting that the elders might decide to search every house in the village, he hid the image in a hole in the darkest nook of the sanctum sanctorum itself. He now intended shifting it to the town, particularly when he noticed the three boys getting interested in the deserted temple for reasons best known to them. The idol was to fetch him good money—he had been assured by a gang who obviously planned to smuggle it out of the country.

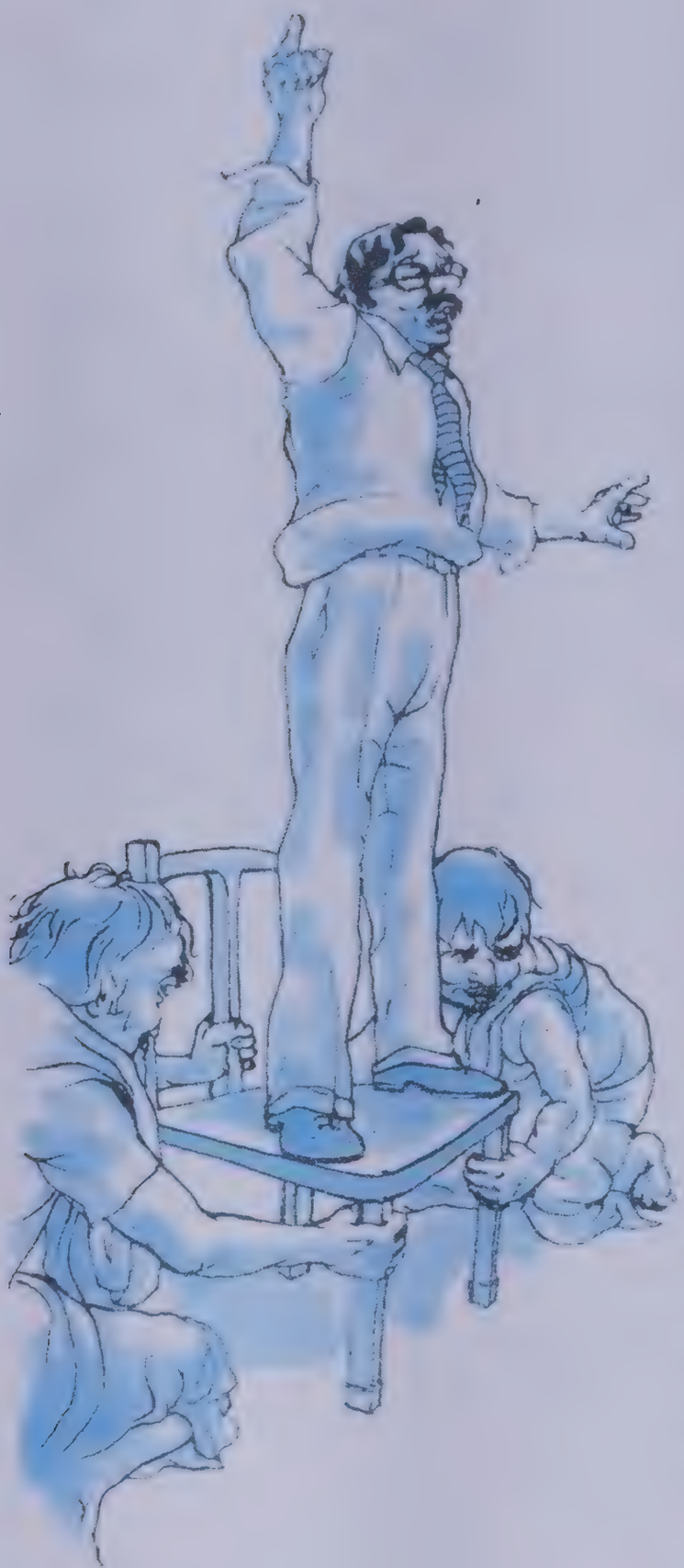
But no sooner had he removed the slab that covered the hole and brought out the image than he saw the tiger emerging from

another corner of the room. He was sure that it was the wrath of the goddess that had taken that terrible form and was about to wreak vengeance on him. He did not know what happened thereafter.

Ghanu was put under arrest.

Meanwhile Bipin whispered some words to the Naib which brightened up the venerable old man's face. The whisper soon became a loud enough rumour: the grandson-in-law had renounced his demand for a bicycle—which, in fact, was not his but his greedy father's demand. How many husbands were blessed with wives who would intercede between them and hungry tigers? This is the question he threw to the wide world, which included his father and the tribe of similar fathers. His pride in his wife soon became so loud, in chaste literary prose characteristic of a budding teacher, that Shakuntala who had braved the tiger not long ago was now hiding from her own people in dire embarrassment.





The young Collector suddenly climbed the solitary chair which, because of its doddering condition, had to be held tight by Bipin and Virdas kneeling on the floor on both the sides.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" said the Collector, assuming a special tone which he had kept in reserve till then. "Jay, Ramu and Shekhar are the pride not only of your village, or of Devla police station jurisdiction or even of our district or of our State, but of the whole country. Jay's valour and the presence of mind of Ramu and Shekhar will remain imprinted in golden letters in the pages of, of...."

The Naib's elder son held out a glass of fresh tender coconut water at this point. The Collector took a sip and resumed,"... in the pages of the history of Vikrampur if it is ever written."

Bipin and Virdas temporarily released the chair from their grip and clapped. The crowd got the clue and applauded generously. The Collector, after displaying a very broad smile, carefully balanced himself and silenced the applause by waving his arms affably and said again, "Ladies and gentlemen, for your information the Great Grand Circus had announced a reward of two hundred rupees for the person or persons who would give them any information about their tiger, leading to its recovery. That amount goes to Ramu and Shekhar. And I, as the District Collector, have the pleasure of rewarding Jay with a hundred rupees for his exemplary courage. Ladies and gentlemen, I need hardly say that their virtues cannot be

measured in terms of rewards. They are just three great boys!" The Collector descended from the chair and sat down in it and finished drinking the rest of the coconut water. The crowd, quite overwhelmed, raised a thunderous shout of *Haribol*—glory to God.

Ramu and Shekhar joined the two sepoys and Virdas and Bipin in carrying the cage to the jeep waiting half a mile away. Jay was too short for the task, and was content to walk under the cage. Almost the entire village followed them. When the cage was placed on the trailer and the jeep was ready to leave, someone commented, "Look, how the tiger's eyes are fixed on his three friends."

Jay, Ramu and Shekhar had to suppress their tears with tremendous effort, for they supposed that crying would not be in keeping with their status as the friends of the tiger!

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It was evening. The three village lads had just witnessed the miracle of their life—a movie courtesy a touring enterprise, when, on their homeward journey yet another strange experience engulfs them in the form of a flash flood, pushing them up to two entangled trees. Dawn breaks and the three friends are joined by an unusual companion—awful but so gentle—who becomes their new friend.

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His publications by the NBT include *Stories of Light and Delight, Books Forever, Story of Krishna, A Bride inside a Casket* and many more.

Distinguished for his originality in both commercial and fine arts, **Sisir Datta** was the Art Editor of The Heritage, a quarterly magazine, and a consultant for a number of art and publishing institutions.

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